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Arkansas History Commission

AND ITS WORK



By
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I am glad of the opportunity to speak to this audience which is representative of the highest intellectual cultivation in the State. In accepting the invitation I am conscious of the responsibility of taking up your time on this occasion. But I feel at liberty to accept the courtesy as a tribute of genuine interest in the cause it is my privilege to represent. Taking this view of your action I am not open to the charge of lacking in modesty when I tell you that what I have to say is worthy of your careful consideration. As the representative of the History Commission it is eminently fitting that I call upon all public spirited citizens for endorsement and co-operation. You must agree with me that the Commission has for its aim the achievement of results which are bound to appeal to our patriotism, to our intelligence and to our pride in the progress of practical education.

There is a fine opportunity for service in constructive research in the local history of this State. Such a service is certain of its own reward, the self-satisfaction of having contributed something of permanent value to the general welfare. Again, Arkansas possesses two geographical distinctions which ought to stir the imagination of the student of Southern history, one who has native pride in presenting the evidence for a better understanding of his own section. In the first place, Arkansas was a part of the Confederacy. At the same time, without detracting

from its character as a Southern State, it is a part of the great West. The combination of South and West should make an inspiring theme for one who is interested in historical investigation.

There is something in the social life and the personality of the Southern people which the severest critic must admire. One who is born and reared in the atmosphere of that something never ceases to long for the charm of it, I believe. The picturesque individuality of the Western people is equally fascinating. The aggressive self-reliance of the Westerner is an irresistible force. His optimism is contagious. He is said to be the composite of all that is best in America, the typical American citizen. And I came to Arkansas in a frame of mind prepared to meet in the Southwest a people who combine the good qualities of both South and West, standing as they do midway between the two.

The migration of Southern people and the advance of the Southern frontier westward has stamped an everlasting impress on the economic, social and political history of both South and Southwest. The unending stream of civilization pouring out of the older States and into the newer, has been a significant and constant factor in the solution of our national problems and in directing our national policies. The historian of today is realizing more and more the powerful and the far-reaching influence exerted by the development of the West on the destiny of the nation. It is universally conceded that the evolution of a unified national state from a loose confederation of thirteen independent states has been brought about largely by the gradual process of creating new states out of the national domain. Unlike the historian of an earlier day, who looked for the cause of every important event in American history to the long struggle between the North and the South for supremacy in the

Union, it is common among present-day historians to lay the greatest stress on the ever-present silent forces tending towards imperial expansion along the Western frontier.

Do not misjudge my motive in making these elementary observations. I would not for one moment insinuate that you are not familiar with this attitude. I only remind you of it in order to prepare the way for what I have to say about a matter nearer home, that is the failure of the historian to weigh accurately in the historical balance the part played by the South and the Southwest in the building of the nation. The new thesis of the scientific historian, European civilization as modified by contact with the western frontier, is fortified by a massive array of what we call contemporary source material. Nevertheless, the investigations have been conducted almost wholly without reference to the data of local history in this section. Arkansas is yet in great measure an unexplored historical field. However fair-minded the general historian may be, so long as present conditions prevail, so long as we neglect our own local history, it will be impossible for historical writers to do justice to a section of the Union which is the equal of any other in matters of material progress, to a State which has contributed its full share to the political prestige of the United States as a whole.

But I turn now to a question about which we are all concerned as Arkansans, that is the collection and the preservation of Arkansas history, and, I think I may add, the cultivation of a finer appreciation of the subject generally. It may not be out of place in the outset to summarize briefly the successive steps in the development of the Commission, since it is the agent through which the above results are to be secured.

As it is now organized the History Commission was established in 1909, by act of the General Assembly. But you may remember that its origin was at a somewhat earlier date. It grew out of the realization of a public responsibility. It is the natural result of constant necessity for systematic methods in the conservation of local and state history. As the birthday of this progressive movement to discharge a public duty, to preserve the records of a great commonwealth and its people, I should take the day on which was organized the Arkansas Historical Association. I can not express too emphatically my appreciation of the work already done and now being done by that association of intelligent workers. And I feel, in this connection, it is proper to call the name of Prof. John Hugh Reynolds of Fayetteville. The Association and the Commission will stand as a monument to his wisdom, to his scholarship and to his patriotic enterprise. There are others whose labors and sacrifices are worthy of the highest praise. You perhaps are better acquainted with the work of these distinguished citizens, men and women, than I am and I need not, therefore, take up your time to go through the list.

The first Commission was appointed under the initial act of 1905. This act, however, was temporary and the Commission created by it was limited in its powers to a specific task. It was, to assist in the publication of the first volume of the reports of the Historical Association, and further to make a thorough investigation of the available historical source material in the State. Both duties were ably performed. The results of the investigation were reported to the governor and by him to the General Assembly. So impressed was the State government by the report submitted that the temporary Commission was continued. After four years of diligent investigation and wise agitation the permanent Commission was

established on a solid basis. Speaking of the service rendered by the temporary Commission, Professor Reynolds has well said, it "blazed the way and laid the foundation of a great work." To this statement of fact I want to add a word of explanation. It made possible the permanent Commission. It aroused sympathetic public sentiment. Live public opinion in favor of the enterprise is the strongest possible proof of the service rendered during those four years of experiment. On the continued growth of such a sentiment will depend the sucecss and the usefulness of the permanent Commission.

In my opinion the foundation of the permanent Commission is broad and well laid. The construction of the act, the Commission's charter of rights and duties, bears the traces of a master hand guided by liberal public policy. After careful study of the statute it is clearly evident to me that at least three high ideals were uppermost in the minds of those who conceived the organization. These, as I shall style them, are efficiency, permanency, and freedom from the embarrassments of political affiliations.

For the efficiency of the plan a great deal can be said in its favor. It is the application of a new theory of state aid. In spite of its comparative newness, its excellency, as a method of approaching the work to be done, is clearly evident from the experience of several Southern states. The main features of the plan have had about a dozen years of practical application. In the hands of skilled experts it has yielded returns of the greatest scientific value.

Appropriation by states for the maintenance of state historical societies is an old and more or less common practice. A number of the states have dealt successfully with their historical materials in this way, that is, through what may be called a subsidized historical society. But the mechanical structure of

such an organization seems likely to be complex. It does not, perhaps, combine ease of administration with a clear definition of powers and duties.

On the contrary, a legally created commission or department can be granted large and definite powers. The plan is a flexible one. Its organization is simple. Administrative control is direct. Competency and vigorous application can easily be had.

Moreover, the field of the historical society should be separated from that of the commission or state department of archives and history. A state should have both. The one should be the complement of the other. In other words, there should be a regular department or commission to take care of the public archives and other records. There should be also an incorporated association of persons for the purpose of promoting constructive research in local history? Fortunately Arkansas has both.

Our Commission is similar in organization and purpose to what may be very properly called the Alabama plan. The department of archives and history in Mississippi and other Southern states was doubtless a conscious imitation of the Alabama department. And in every state where it has been tried the departmental or commission system has met with greater success than its most enthusiastic friends had anticipated. The work being done is apprecited by the scholar, and, what is equally important, it is rendering service which the people of those states appreciate. Arkansas shall have like results.

No one will question the fact that history should be an unbroken portrayal of men and things as they are. To make it so, a work of the sort entrusted to the Commission, should be continuous throughout the life of the community. Every day's record in the life of a state has its place in the life of that state. We

are what we are today, in part, because we were what we were yesterday. The life of a state, like the lives of the individuals who make up the state, is a relative thing. To understand the composition and the tendencies and the aspirations of its people one must analyze the successive stages by which the community grew into an organic body-politic. The lost records of a year or even of a day make a missing link in the chain which connects the past with the present. A link so lost may be costly in the economy of social progress. The only logical time to save such a record is in the making. Thus permanency in the institution set apart to take care of our historical records is of the very first importance.

I have a mind to pass over without comment that feature in the structure of the Commission most gratifying to find in an institution of its kind. That is to say, according to my interpretation, it was the intention of the originators to free it and to keep it independent of all political affiliations. There is everything to gain and nothing to lose by strict adherence to that policy. It is the A-B-C principle in the training of the student of history. Without it history is a misnomer. An advocate cannot be a fair historian; a partisan is an impossible historian. The custodian of a state's historical sources should be impartial in his judgment of men and affairs, unswayed by personal bias in his estimate of historic values. The ideal must be to reveal the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in the materials handed down to posterity. The complete separation of this work from practical politics is essential to any sort of success.

By the creation of such an institution Arkansas has taken a long stride forward. Be it remembered to our credit that few of the states have so wisely planned for the conservation of the records of their

development. The sound and progressive character of the system inaugurated may go far to counterbalance tardy action. Consequences of vast importance are bound to follow this movement to atone for past negligence. In the near future we shall be in a better position to study and to know our past, and the knowledge gained will surely bear fruit in a higher order of citizenship, in a finer appreciation of social responsibility, in a more rational settlement of the confounding complexities of modern society. Again, the contribution of the Southwest to national progress can be estimated at a figure nearer its true value. The general historian may work out new angles of observation by a thorough treatment of the material which we shall provide for his investigation.

The function of the historian is three-fold. He should combine the skill of an investigator with the accuracy of a chronicler and the logic of an interpreter. As an investigator he should explore the past; as a chronicler he should keep a record of important events; as an interpreter he should reason from cause to effect and point out the relation between transactions past and the status of existing affairs. He should not suffer himself to become so absorbed in the details of the past that he has no thought for the meaning of current events and the difficulties which confront men of affairs in their economic, social and political relations of every day life. The field so marked out is a broad one. The requirements, doubtless, are too great to be met by most of us. The limitations of human capacity, perhaps, have led most of our historians to confine their efforts to a narrow range of activity. In this way we may account for the fact that too much of our history is a mere chronological record dates and a colorless narration of events.

But what I wish to speak of with reference to this narrow construction of the historian's function,

and concerning the unsatisfying results of his work is the error which such limitations have lodged in the popular mind. There is more or less common opinion that the preservation of history is sentimental rather than useful, that a knowledge of history is ornamental rather than practical. This impression is doubtless the natural outcome of the historian's neglect, of a duty half performed. In other words, history, as it is too often written, does not help us to solve the problems of every-day life. The histories with which we are most familiar only tell about such things as the discovery and the colonization of America, the war of independence, the rise and fall of political parties, sectionalism, the battles of the war between the states, and the rancor of reconstruction. The facts as told do not answer the practical question, What is the relation of all these things to present conditions? It is a common saying that the present must be judged in the light of past experience. Yet, when we turn to our histories for helpful suggestions, which we have a right to expect, the light is usually missing. So it follows that we think of a knowledge of history as a sort of intellectual luxury of little practical utility, of the preservation of history as a fad rather than a useful science.

I would not be understood to imply that history can solve all our social and political difficulties. What I do mean to say is that the present bears a close relation to the past, and that history should at least point out this relationship. Our problems of today are the outgrowth of development. They have their origin in the past. Social phenomena are never spontaneous or accidental. In the treatment of physical maladies the medical scientist begins by diagnosis, by investigating the cause, the origin of the disease. Just so in the treatment of the body-politic or the social mass we must seek first the source of the evil and

how the difficulty grew. Again, history has a lesson of optimism to teach. Every generation has its social problems, its political corruption, and its economic complexities for which mitigating remedies are found by those who have to grapple with them. And while history can not supply the specific remedy, it should instill the faith that Providence always fits the back to the burden.

May I give a single illustration of how historical research may work out in the adjustment of practical affairs? The Federal Government was in operation thirty years before even the secretary's minutes of the Philadelphia convention were published. Madison's notes were not accessible for about fifty years after the convention. The proceedings of the several state ratification conventions were long neglected in some cases. Matters of the very greatest importance happened in connection with those events pertinent to the administration of the government under the constitution. Some of the facts are entirely lost. Calhoun's theories of nullification and state rights and Webster's logic on national unity rested on interpretations of the fundamental law of the land made without precise knowledge of many important facts in its historic setting. I am convinced by personal experience that, had they known all the facts which are now known, had they been able to view the constitution in the light of recent historical research on the subject, much error and many misunderstandings might have been avoided. Who knows but that reason and not the sword might have settled the long and bitter struggle between the two sections of our common country?

By the application of correct methods and plenty of energy in the administration of the duties laid upon the Commission the investment will yield profitable returns. I am prepared to assume full responsibility for my faith when I say that we shall get results capa-

ble of being transformed into higher standards of living, public and private. It is investment with a future, with the promise of profitable rewards of the sort which command the attention of the busy business man. The day has arrived when those of us engaged in the arts of so-called private business can not ignore social, political and educational responsibilities. We can not afford to treat lightly the forces at work through the social sciences for the uplift of social, political and industrial standards. We can not afford to sneer at the historian's work as the hobby of a crank on the subject of antiquarian curiosities. Its practical value is already demonstrated in a thousand ways. When our own work has grown large enough to give proof of its possibilities of service to the general public and in the administration of government, we shall see in it a strong factor of social betterment and of public administration according to the principles of sound business.

In this connection, however, I want to say, emphatically, it is not the purpose of the Commission or their Secretary to write history. Our mission is to gather up the records of all our local and state activities, past, present and future; to preserve and classify these records; to make them accessible to the public. This and this alone covers our official duty with reference to pure historical research. The writing of history is, and it should be, a matter of private enterprise. The work of the Commission is to be a means to an end. It is a public institution at the service of the historian, and it is hoped that through its offices he will be better able to fulfil the duties of his threefold function to the community. The Secretary will cheerfully take it upon himself, even go out of his way wherever and whenever possible, to encourage, to direct, and to aid all persons who have the ambition to attempt to do any part of the history of Arkansas.

With an institution of this kind moulded to our hand we expect to collect, to preserve, and to classify in the course of a few years most of the existing material for the history of Arkansas' developed resources. The collection should embrace, as far as possible, the contemporary sources covering every form of activity within the state from the earliest days. It should be kept at a point central to the entire state. It should be kept open to and convenient for the use of the general public at all times. Because of its vast value and because, like the Declaration of Independence, it cannot be duplicated, every precaution should be taken against destruction or decay. And I doubt if any state in the Union has a place better adapted to the purposes than our new capitol. It will stand for ages, a monument to the progress of a patriotic people. It is eminently proper that we preserve in it for all time the records of our past, present and future achievements.

IN CONCLUSION, let me sum up in cursory fashion the main features of the task set the Commission. In the first place it is manifestly their duty, in the person of the Secretary, to act as custodian of public archives. By the term archives we mean the official state and county records not in current use. Under this head is found such things as the documentary proceedings of our several constitutional conventions, the session laws, special ordinances, war records, messages and the official correspondence of the governors, and all manner of manuscripts and documents executed by the different departments of state no longer essential in the transaction of ordinary business. Each department, however, is made the sole judge, as I understand the provision, of the records which may be conveniently deposited with the Commission. It is also desired to supplement this material with county and municipal records, religious and secret

order publications, newspaper files and pamphlet publications descriptive of every phase of activity in the state. It is of the very greatest importance to enliven this published material with the manuscript writings and correspondence of our distinguished citizens dealing with public questions. If we could lay our hands on the news and views of all our distinguished men and women it would be a comparatively simple matter to write the history of the state.

Secondly, the Commission is authorized to establish an historical and archaeological museum. It will add much to the effectiveness of the institution to have such a feature in close proximity to the collection of archives. Here we shall preserve and exhibit in suggestive manner historic objects as the concrete evidence of the social, religious, educational, industrial and political life of the people in every period of the state's development. Doubtless the war period will be most prolific in material for this feature of the work. Since the war between the states is the supreme crisis in the history of the South, when our whole social system was revolutionized, it may well claim a large share of our attention. Again, the red man is not without interest, for the reason that his conquest and then his protection was until recently a question hard to deal with. Life on the frontier was always modified by his contact, and frontier life is a long romance in American history. Arkansas possesses much mute evidence of Indian occupation. From his relics of the stone age, in which he lived until modern times, we may construct a picture of the domestic life of man in an age before civilization appeared on the face of the earth. Such an open book is full of human interest and educational value.

And now, finally, I want to say a word in behalf of a hall of fame. While we would not, if we could, revive the customs of primitive hero worship, we do

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believe in fostering a sense of gratitude to our patriotic public servants. If history teaches any lesson, it is that the first stage of social and political disintegration is seen in the decline of reverence for venerable institutions. The observance of such commands as "honor thy father and thy mother," revere the memory of the benefactors of mankind, or emulate the example of the heroic patriot, is the rock bottom of moral, social and political stamina. The notable achievements of a people are always associated with the personality of a hero. It should be so. Otherwise the stimulating inspiration of personal example would be lost. I therefore commend the third proposition in the comprehensive scheme of this great work, to erect a hall of fame, where the physical likeness of Arkansas' distinguished citizens and beloved patriots may be carefully remembered.